

GRACE AND COURTESY AND BEYOND

by Pat Schaefer

Taking up the cause of grace and courtesy across the planes of education, Pat Schaefer tells of the grace and courtesy of successive planes within a school culture and gives a glimpse of how the Montessori vision of a new society can look. Grace and courtesy go well beyond the practice of manners and into the topic of deep observation and appreciation of the other. Grace and courtesy are in the ability to focus on others, to pay attention to others, and to model a balanced behavior ideal of caring for the beauty and order of a space. Pat plays up the importance of rituals and gives examples of musical celebrations, Wisdom Day, the winter solstice, and “flying up” celebrations (the rite of passage from Children’s House to the elementary) as being acts of attention to civility done for the sake of the community.

PART 1. REFLECTIONS ON TWO CORE PRACTICES THAT CAN ULTIMATELY CHANGE SOCIETY

The essence of grace and courtesy is presence; it is the presence of being human. The embodiment of these acts of grace and courtesy is nothing less than being present to life, being aware with all the senses of all the lovely stimulants of life, but mainly of our greatest gift: our fellow humans.

Social Politeness: Good Manners in the Elementary Class

The process of social politeness always involves the whole child. Recently, at the AMI Refresher Course in Houston, Texas, elementary Montessori teacher trainer Baiba Crummins Grazzini spoke of the importance of addressing courtesy and manners.

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This talk was presented at the NAMTA conference titled Grace, Courtesy, and Civility Across the Planes, Portland, OR, March 13-16, 2014.

The whole process begins in the primary, in the House of Children, where courtesy and manners are part of practical life, a way of doing things, a way of being. As the child enters the next phase of childhood, the sensitive period changes, and being social takes on a whole new way of being. The child learns a natural process of being with others, respecting one another and one's guides, not so much in the details of grace and courtesy, but rather in the process of being with others with integrity, directness, honesty, which are of more consequence than mere manners.

Then, in adolescence, that way of being takes on even deeper roots of community forming, of students building with heightened sensitivity the respect, the give and take, the courtesy and forgiveness of a community member. The being must become, in essence, civil, capable of true civility, which is both honorable and understanding. Herein is the personal transformation; herein are the makings of a new society. These children are free to be themselves, fearless, welcoming the exigencies of life, courageous enough to be honest and trusting, able to build a new society.

The acts of grace and courtesy contain in their center an openness to what and who is there, not only healthy ego, but a receptacle of



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other egos, of simply “the other.” It is a spiritual way of being. It is quiet at its core and it is peaceful and humble. This is in its essence the beginning of peace, the start of the process that opens one to the other and signals the next responses of listening, responding, and loving.

So while the culmination of the process is social, it begins and remains in its inception both individual and personal. This is why it is so essential to understand the important differences in each of the planes of development: 0-6, 6-12, 12-18, 18-24. To live out each plane fully, one becomes capable of shaping and creating a new society.

In focusing particularly on the elementary, I have condensed the process to the letters AIM, the aim of the process:

A – Attention: being present, eye contact

I – Intention: choice of action, focus

M – Manifestation: the correct practice of manners

The AIM of grace and courtesy in the elementary is less in the details or manifestation of manners and more in the nature of attention and intention needed to be an effective, functioning member of society.

It is why Montessori students are notable and different. While the outward manifestation of manners is notable, it is the inward attention/presence, the intention/focus that contains a certain integrity that leaves a lasting mark.

I will chronicle a recent “lesson” I gave to a whole 9-12 class of 28 students at Lake Country School to illustrate this point. I asked four couples of students to act out four proper and improper illustrations of greetings (hello, goodbye); receiving (please, thank you); introduction (____, this is ____); and starting a conversation (introduction of self, weather comment).

The dry run of the students was my opportunity to point out the appropriate and inappropriate details. In the acting out, the inap-

propriate got far more enthusiasm and attention. At the close of the day, I noted in goodbye handshakes, those students who were truly present and made eye contact, for they were the more normalized Montessori students. This exercise illustrated the “whole child” process of courtesy and manners in Montessori. They are a product of a developmental process. While I noted for their remembrance “head up, eye contact, speak up,” usually it was the fully normalized who did this. It was who they were.

Thus the manifestation, the actual practice of manners, is really only part of the process that is seeded in the art of being present, in the practice of focusing on the person. It is necessary to comment on a movement or phenomenon in our current society that works powerfully against the practice of manners. It is observable everywhere, in schools where allowed and in social gatherings: the all-abiding presence of the cell phone/smart phone that takes full attention away from the immediate environment. This is a device that even robs us of the awkward social moments that call forth introductions and conversation. The attention to these devices speaks directly to the nature of human experience, for it robs us of hearing various sounds, observing color, behavior, and all the idiosyncrasies of life that tumble before us for observation and opportunities for social interaction. These electronic devices are essentially *virtual* experiences, not *real* experiences involving all the human senses. They invite an essentially ego-centric behavior, one not open to the other randomly and vitally. This is changing the very fabric of our society.

The one inner sanctum that we remain in control of is our schools. We do not control the culture of schools, we create it by our own behavior, expectations, and constant manifestation of respect. Thus even in public school settings where rights can trump manners, we can, without rules but in more subtle ways of relationship, create a culture of respect. This culture says, “We don’t do things like that around here.”

This topic brings us to a phenomenon we are all dealing with on some level: the websites and anonymous communication that goes on amongst our late elementary and teen cultures. We recently experienced in our greater Twin Cities community a seventeen-year-

old boy who tweeted two words that set off a wildfire of accusations and slander. In response to “Did you have a sexual encounter with a twenty-eight-year-old female P.E. teacher?” The captain of both football and basketball teams tweeted, “Actually, yes,” apparently sarcastically, but with dreadful repercussions. Why this young man would do such a thing remains the question. But a greater question is, how can a school create a human culture that pre-supposes civil behavior?

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This is where the depth and breadth of Montessori education becomes a vital tool for building civil societies. David Kahn's introduction to NAMTA's most recent (Winter, 2014) journal's theme: “From Early Childhood to Adolescence: Community as Oasis and Origins of Peace” comments on the centrality of morality in the normal development of the child. We in Montessori work are indeed addressing the essence of civil society, and indeed that abides in the peaceful core of each individual child we nurture, releasing their power to transform society.

This process is in essence moral, dealing with right ways, and wrong ways, and beginning where awareness begins: with the very young child. It grows organically through the elementary years and through building the communities of adolescents in junior high and high school. Ultimately it culminates in college years and beyond when a depth of awareness translates into building a new society.

Recently I attended a swim meet of my granddaughter, held in a local, public middle school. Throughout the building were signs, “Honesty, Integrity, Courage,” reminders to treat others as you would want to be treated. Signs. I'm sure they support their teachers in their quest for civility, but how effective are signs plastered on walls of a large school struggling to be civil? We owe our next generation so much more. They all deserve to be allowed to become

who they really can be as individuals, as group members, and as creators of a community-based, entirely new society.

We live that new society in school communities where we model it via real, not virtual, experiences. We house it in buildings whose décor is tasteful, aesthetically pleasing, and respectful. For it is both in environment and relationships that we have all along nurtured civility, a right, moral way to live, marked by good manners and courtesy. Often, visitors to our school will comment, “It just feels different here, it feels like we’d want to stay.” If that is true, we will have created a civil society, a new society, and it is the children, the students, who have done it.

Ritual, Celebration, and Community

Ritual and celebration take on a new importance in a Montessori school. Maria Montessori made a brilliant discovery in the observation of children. She saw the phenomena of the power in them, unleashed and allowed to grow through the simple acts of concentration and involvement in work of their choice. She wrote profusely of it. But strangely, she did not write of the phenomenon that occurs when people, parents, in a given location witness this phenomenon and want it for all of their children through all of their stages of development. This phenomena has come to be called *school*, a collection of classes, usually of subsequent developmental levels up through adolescence and in some cases high school. Successful schools often inevitably end up with the demand to educate the child through all the years of their development.

Thus this school develops as a unique culture, belonging to the area of its birth, and retains the same remarkable elements observed in children throughout the world. This aggregate, this school, needs to be addressed separately to define its needs and assist its healthy development. Thus we come to the phenomena of ritual, of celebration. How does the school address its culture, retain it, support its maturity and growth, and openly value it? One important way, apart from retaining worthy and skillful Montessori leadership, is through ritual and celebration.

Ritual must be seen as the vessel, the agent that retains the culture and renews it. A natural consequence of the experience of ritual is



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remembrance. It stokes our memories of activities and people who created that which came before, thus sustaining the essence of what we experience now. Ritual in a Montessori school best follows the ebb and flow of the year, and includes both all developmental levels, and those unique to a single developmental level.

Thus the beginning of the year rituals naturally emerge; moments of equinox (solstice), first snowfalls (winter), first green growth (spring), and moments of transition/growth. Such celebrations invariably are characterized in school by music. Vocal music is so important in a Montessori school, for it becomes essentially the voice of the community. Each celebration, in addition to coming together to sing, involves usually a symbolic action. These must come from individual communities, individual teachers, and leaders.

I will illustrate the details of three celebrations at Lake Country School, our Montessori school in Minneapolis. First, a beginning of the year celebration of Wisdom Day for all levels. Second, a celebration of winter solstice by the junior high level, and third, Flying Up at the end of the year for our Children's House and finally the whole school. In illustrating the three celebrations, I will comment on how they came to be. What sustained each of them was simple: our collective memory, "Let's do that again."

Wisdom Day

In the 1980s, I received a phone call from Susan Hartman. She and her friend, Paula DeCost, had travelled to Moscow by invitation as part of an exchange project to thaw out the Cold War. She wondered if we as a school would like to take part in this exchange by adopting a Moscow school with which to communicate. The school interested was Moscow School #31, which went from elementary through high school. Two teachers from that school visited us and that began the process of exchange over a three-year period. It was like a dream come true, for in those days the Soviet Union was essentially closed to Americans, and the cracks were just beginning to emerge in the dividing wall of the Cold War. So it took a certain amount of courage to enter into this process.

Of the two teachers, I recall Marina, who later hosted Larry graciously in Moscow. Both teachers, though, were charming and totally enthralled by our Montessori school. We took them to our lake cabin in Wisconsin, which they likened to their *daccas*—simple cottages on a clearing on which they farmed or gardened.

In our first year of communication with their whole school, we exchanged descriptions of three celebrations honored throughout the year. We sent Thanksgiving, Valentine's Day, and Labor Day—they all had to be secular. They sent three, of which Wisdom Day, the first day of school celebration, still remains a celebration at Lake Country School. Moscow School #31 liked our Valentine's Day the best. Subsequent years we each celebrated one of the other school's celebrations, and the three-year cycle ended in an exchange of about a dozen Lake Country students (adolescents) visiting Moscow School #31 with Larry Schaefer, their teacher, and Peggy McKenna, our Children's House teacher who spoke Russian. About one dozen Soviet students came to Lake Country School with their teachers and stayed with families of our students.

It was a great, successful exchange and the result was that we still open the school year with a Wisdom Day celebration. The idea came from the Soviets who regarded schooling as a great treasure. It was an honor and a privilege to come to school. The singular symbol of the opening day was the oldest boy carrying the youngest boy on his shoulders, and the oldest girl carrying the youngest girl on her

shoulders in through the school's main doors, shaking hands with the principal and then with the teachers, as flowers are bestowed. Flags of each class are carried to identify groups entering, and the parents say goodbye, some crying.

Songs begin the day, along with a few words from the principal. Some favorites from our musicians, Larry Dittberner and Sarah Richardson, are "This Is My School" sung by the Children's House, joined by all, and "A Big Fat Walleye," introduced by Larry Dittberner. We wait for the junior high to return from their Odyssey to celebrate our first day together.

The Winter Solstice

Winter solstice is celebrated by the junior high on the last day before winter (Christmas) break. They have done it for five years. It has no religious connection, but does incorporate a ritual way of celebrating this time of year versus a party. The ideas of good will to others, joyful giving, and a sense of gratitude and reflection upon the year ending, are all part of this celebration.

Kris Schaefer owns the inception of this practice because she wanted something quiet, reflective, and serious, versus the rowdy party that they had experienced. She unabashedly says, "We do it because I want to do it," but finds the students gladly accept the fact that with seriousness can come fun.

They meet in the early afternoon in the commons area and it lasts from about 1:30 pm to 3:45 pm. A small group of students join Kris in the preparation, and after introductions, some shared poetry, and gift giving, they proceed to the back hall stairs which, on the outside of the building, commemorates the long red stairs, a Montessori Children's House sensorial material. The students crowd in, four to a stair, and the dark stairwell is lit by candles on the wall. The acoustics are great, and Kris at the bottom of the stairs recalls the history of the practice, its purpose, and peace songs like "The Rivers of Babylon" and "This Pretty Planet" are sung, accompanied by Kris's guitar.

Finally they share the "Roses and Thorns" they have prepared. The petals contain mention of all things that have gone well, and

thorns are written on pieces of paper and represent those things that have not gone well, things to which they wish to say “goodbye.” They conclude by filing out at the bottom of the stairs and burning the thorns in a specially prepared fire bowl.

This ceremony is symbolic of the passage of time, and while adolescence is not the best time for ritual, they internally need it. The junior high feels that the Odyssey marks the beginning of their year together, as the bike trip marks the end. Winter solstice marks the continuum, the passage of time, the shortest day and the longest night.

Ritual must be seen as the vessel, the agent that retains the culture and renews it. A natural consequence of the experience of ritual is remembrance. It stokes our memories of activities and people who created that which came before, thus sustaining the essence of what we experience now.

Flying Up

Our Flying Up ceremony at the end of the year began in Children’s House. Patty Bachmeier, Sarah Endsley, and Jean Melom, a strong, experienced trio, initiated it for the five-year-olds who were leaving “the nest” of the lower level of the building where three 3-6 year old classes were held, to “fly up” to the next floor, the level where three 6-9 year old classes were placed. Each child would receive a rolled paper “diploma,” shake hands with their teacher (and usually receive a hug), and run down the hall crowded with hand-waving parents, flapping their “wings” as they fly up to the next level of life.

As usual, songs accompanied them during introduction and conclusion. Now, the ceremony continues, but has also morphed into an all-school assembly with names announced and children moving from each level, welcomed by those in the next higher level, with explanations of what they will experience as older Lake Country students. Again, the passage of time, transitions, are honored for everyone.

While school is the social phenomenon, and ritual and celebration require the group in order to be meaningful, to be something more than a celebratory party, it must begin with the individual. In a workshop on grace and courtesy, I spoke of the spiritual dimension of good manners and politeness in a community. That these acts are

about being present to life, being grateful for it, for one another, for the blessing a good, healthy community bestows on each of us. This does not happen accidentally. But it is the adults who witness the phenomena of the personal transformation of the children. It is their awareness that calls forth a response. And that response is celebration, repeated annually through ritual—a vessel to hold the act in collective memory. And once these rituals are repeated, the process of remembering is in motion.

Strangely, the singular effect of remembering is contained in the word *re-member*. So in order to stay together, to continue the magic of a vital Montessori culture, we must celebrate. We must re-member it, re-connect it to our ongoing lives in a memorable, grateful way.

PART 2. CIVILITY

While we will address the topic of civility as we experience it in our classrooms, in life, we cannot escape the link it has to socialization in general, to the society we, and the children, experience daily. Think of your response to these three questions as we probe civility, its history, and possibly history itself.

1. Since you are working with children and their parents in a Montessori school, what do you observe as our society today, what characteristics mark our society in a positive way, the characteristics building a civil society?
2. What are the negative aspects that work against building a civil society?
3. What can we, as Montessorians, do to support the children and their parents as we build a civil society?

Now let us begin our probe into the nature of civility and its history. Larry Schaefer and I have focused on the issue of civility and its history. To truly understand civility, its importance, its history, one must come to an awareness of its opposite: rudeness, self-centeredness, and bullying. The society that accepts a lack of civility strikes at the very foundation of a working democracy and can degrade a world of diplomacy that solves problems.

We must pay attention to the implications of what we are doing when we educate the young. It is why we must be aware that the strong force of the opposite of civility can only be countered by individuals who embody true civility, who are present, who socialize well, and know how to create vibrant community. Here we come to the essence of Montessori education and its attention to all four planes of development.

Here we must understand that our current society in its time and place is fighting the essence of rudeness, self-centeredness, and bullying. We experience it now, and we experience it everywhere. It is, in a frightening way, becoming acceptable. What are its manifestations? I would say that in a subtle way, we are accepting virtual experience as a replacement of real experience. In so doing, we lessen expectations, and create a society lacking empathy, human encounter, and awareness. It happens as we increase encounters with the electronic, we ignore the needs of others and ourselves, here and now. In short, we are increasingly not present.

If this is happening in adult society, it is impacting the children, even before they receive their own electronic device. When indeed they, too, in late childhood and early adolescence, receive their device, they enter into that world devoid of presence. The human being is capable of extreme attraction to small screens that can communicate immediate messages, provide entertainment, and give and receive random thoughts and needs of themselves and others. In effect, the experience slowly takes precedence over real experiences. Waiting for and observing encounters with other humans requires all the senses and can result in immediate change and growth.

The virtual experience often, in essence, is rude, for it takes precedence in its immediacy over anyone else present. So it too is essentially self-centered, for it puts the need and desire of the individual over anything or anyone else. This mindset opens the door to a culture that invites a *me* generation, one that tolerates the bully completely and is lacking in empathy.

It is precisely the pervasiveness—it's everywhere: the local mall, the airport, even the halls of some schools—that should call our attention. But also alarming is witnessing the parents of young



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children choosing unnecessary electronic communication over the simple, natural conversation that can occur with little ones when they are open to it. But a frightening phenomenon is older children, adolescents, young people preferring this virtual communication over real experience, even in group situations (i.e., two teenagers in the same room texting one another). It is, in essence, a revolution in social behavior that we all partake in because of its benefits: quick and convenient communication.

If, in effect, this phenomenon is a revolution, it is all the more important for us to realize what constitutes the counter-revolution. It could be reduced to one word: *presence*. It is the call for the adult to always put first being really present to the children: listening, talking, observing. It is being present to oneself, accepting and valuing silence, observation, activity such as walking, for its own value. So, too, is the necessity of being present to place: again hearing, observing, responding. We are constantly challenged by the task of being present to life.

The counter-balance of being present immediately cancels out the rudeness of ignoring the presence of others, of putting the needs of the self constantly over the needs of others, or the temptation to

put one's own aggrandizement over others as the bully does. In essence, this presence is embodied in Montessori education, especially when viewed through the four planes of development.

Children in the earliest development (ages 0-6) have first the fullest presence of the adult who must respect them, observe them, and meet their needs. The children, allowed to choose activities appropriate to their age and need, concentrate and involve themselves. This results in the children being present to themselves and ultimately present, respecting others doing the same.

Children in the next phase of development (ages 6-12) in this same process are keen on socializing, on "working" now with others in groups. They are now not only present to themselves, but present to others in a deeper way.

This phenomenon grows into adolescence (ages 12-18), when they become capable of creating intentional community, in tune to the presence of themselves and others in changing moments of need and giving. This creates the fabric of a well-working society. Having experienced this presence in a singular way, they are ready as they approach adulthood (ages 18-24) to enter into the larger society,



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contributing the civility of a citizen who cares, is empathetic, and effective. If all children could grow in this way, being present to themselves and society, we would indeed have a new society, one vibrant and interactive with real experience, not merely virtual.

We must address essential questions that result in observable, concrete action in taking on this pervasive, intrusive revolution that has changed our society. Indeed, for our counter-revolution to be successful, we must collectively agree and act, based on Montessori's deep insights. I will speak later about how, specifically, she addressed this problem [see "Social Cohesion, Grace, and Courtesy: An Editorial" earlier in this issue].

Here are the three questions again:

1. Since you are working with children and their parents in a Montessori school, what do you observe as our society today? What characteristics mark our society in a positive way, building a civil society?
2. What are the negative aspects of the positives that work against building a civil society?
3. What can we, as Montessorians, do about it? What can we do to support the children and their parents in this process?

An article titled "Steve Jobs Was a Low-Tech Parent" by Nick Bilton in *The New York Times* offered a powerful fact: Tech CEOs such as Steve Jobs seem to know something the rest of us don't and strictly limit the use of screen time for their own children, often banning all gadgets on school nights.

In an interview with Jobs, Bilton said, "So your kids must love the iPad?" Jobs said, "They haven't used it. We limit how much technology our kids use at home." In fact, Walter Isaacson, author of *Steve Jobs* said, "Every evening Steve made a point of having dinner at a big, long table in their kitchen, discussing books and history and a variety of things. No one ever pulled out a computer or iPad. The kids did not seem addicted at all to devices (Bilton).

When talking with Chris Anderson, former editor of *Wired* and now chief executive of 3D Robotics, a drone maker, Bilton discovered that he has instituted time limits and parental controls on every device in his home. "My kids accuse me and my wife of being fascists and overly concerned about tech" (Bilton). He has five children, ages 6 to 17.

"But," he says, "it's because we have seen the dangers of technology first hand. I've seen it in myself." And he lists them as exposure to harmful content like pornography, bullying from other kids, and perhaps worst of all, becoming addicted to their devices, just like their parents.

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Lake Country School states in its parent handbook, in underlined print:

Children are not permitted to use cell phones on school grounds or during school sponsored activities. Parents are not permitted to use cell phones or mobile devices while driving with students in their vehicle. Parents are strongly urged not to use cell phones or other mobile devices while on school grounds or during school sponsored events when students are present. (Lake Country School Parent Handbook 12)

Is this universal, stated practice? Are we unique as Montessori schools in opposing the unregulated use of electronic devices? As an example of the opposite policy, our local public schools have purchased iPads for every student.

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